

DOWN HOUSE BROMLEY, KENT

The Billiard Room Fireplace (Room G14)

by

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Introduction

The present fireplace surround in Room G14, now called the Billiard Room, is entirely new and dates from the restoration of 1997/8, **Figure 3 - Figure 5**. It replaces a surround which was probably installed in the 1930s, **Figure 18 - Figure 19**. The new surround is of timber construction and was chosen to reflect the late eighteenth character of the room.¹

However, there is some evidence in the surviving historic fabric for the late eighteenth or early nineteenth century fireplace which, when considered with the other historic fireplaces in the house, suggests its size and character at the time of Darwin's occupation of the house. A hypothetical reconstruction is included in this report, **Figure 21**.

Down House is a complex accretion of building elements from most periods from the eighteenth century to the present day. Unraveling its historical development is not an easy task. This report which considers the fireplaces in the principal rooms, suggests some possible amendments to the dating scheme applied to the phasing in the reports by prepared John Thorp of Keystone, Historic Buildings Consultants.

In this report, the development of the fireplaces is discussed generally on a chronological basis. The illustrations are likewise arranged according to the suggested date of the fireplace.

¹ Bryant J, 1998, p40

1 The Room G14 in the eighteenth century

In the eighteenth century Room G14 was much smaller than it is now. It is in the south-east corner of the eighteenth century five bay fronted block which forms the core of the present house. The staircase was located mid-way across the south wall in the area now occupied by the south-western quarter of the room G14 and the corridor to the west, **Figure 1**. The chimney breast projected from the centre of the south wall. It was vertically aligned with the stack on the floors above and below, **Figure 6**. The trimmer for the contemporary fireplace remains *in-situ*, **Figure 18**.

2 The creation of the present Room G14 and its lining out

In the late eighteenth or early nineteenth century, the building was overhauled, the front door moved from the centre of the east front to the north wall and the staircase relocated in the north-west corner of the house, **Figure 2**. The Room G14 was enlarged to include the area formerly occupied by the staircase and the chimney breast was modified so that it again stood in the centre of the south wall. The altered stack was given additional support below by the addition of an extra arch in the basement and a trimmer added for the new fireplace, **Figure 6** and **Figure 18**. The walls of room G14 were then lined with plaster above a timber dado, **Figure 3**. The dado rail is reed moulded which suggests a date in the first half of the nineteenth century rather than the late eighteenth and this interpretation is supported by the number of paint layers on the joinery.² The plaster cornice relates to the dado stylistically and therefore appears to be contemporary. The wall face above the dado appears to have been papered from the start.

3 The evidence for the eighteenth or nineteenth century fireplace in Room G14

Evidence for the fireplace which preceded the 1930s surround is provided by the size and location of the chimney breast, the hearth opening, vertical cuts in the dado and by the pattern of the floorboards.

The cuts in the dado form vertical terminations to the dado rail, skirting and the pine boards forming the dado panelling, **Figure 3**. The gaps between the present surround and the termination of the dado were made good with timber, probably when the 1930s surround was installed. The present surround is 1.30m wide. It was made to fit the space previously occupied by the 1930s fireplace. The terminations in the dado panelling indicate that the earlier surround was 1.37m wide.

The mitre cuts in the skirting do not necessarily imply a return in the moulding at this point. It would be unusual if the plinth block of the surround was of the same height and shared the same moulding as the skirting. Furthermore, an internal mitre return is typically cut with a scribed joint, not a straight diagonal cut. Typically, the surround plinth blocks and the skirtings are of different heights and the skirting abutts the surround either above or below the top of the block or is cut to fit around the top of the block. The diagonal mitre cuts probably date from the piecing in of short lengths of moulding between the original skirting and the 1930s surround. There are no vertical cuts in the skirting boards, they were probably replaced in the 1930s.

The hearth stone was also replaced in 1997. It was made to the same dimensions as the existing slab, 1.30m wide and projecting 0.33m from the wall face. The existing slab had decayed. However, the pattern of the floorboards and the trimmer floor frame indicate a much larger stone, 1.45m wide and projecting 0.74m from the wall face, **Figure 3** and **Figure 18**. The dimensions of the implied slab are consistent with the vertical terminations in the dado.

4 The marble fireplace in Room G15, Darwin's Old Study, probably from about 1835

The simple design of the white and grey marble fireplace in Darwin's Old Study, Room G15, suggests a date about 1830-40, **Figure 7** - **Figure 9**. It is clearly the product of the Greek Revival, a

² Hassal C - still in draft

combination of linear mouldings, paterae at the junctions, and a Greek cyma moulding just below the mantelpiece. It probably dates from Cresy's alterations about 1835 when the roof was raised and the house overhauled.³

5 The marble fireplace in Room F15, previously in Darwin's bedroom, Room F2, probably from 1835 or 1843

The fireplace now in Room F15 was moved to its present location from Darwin's bedroom, Room F2, in 1962. A copy of the architect's drawing specifying its relocation survives in the MOW files.⁴ Another product of the Greek Revival, it is similar in design to the fireplace in Darwin's Old Study, Room G15, **Figure 10 - Figure 12**. If it was first installed in room F2 and dates from Cresy's work of c 1835, then it must have been repositioned in 1843 when Darwin added the bay to the Dining Room and raised the floor in Room F2 and possibly moved the chimney breast to the west.

Alternatively, if it dates from Cresy's alterations and was not in its original position in Room F2, several possibilities arise. It is clear from the upper floors that Cresy did not replace every fireplace in the house. Furthermore, the fireplaces most likely to be replaced would surely be those on the ground floor. Was the marble fireplace now in Room F15 originally installed in a ground floor room?

The house that Cresy altered and Darwin bought in 1842 had four principal rooms on the ground floor. The size of the opening implied by the cuts in the dado and floorboards in Room G14 implies a larger fireplace than the F2/15 surround. If it was used originally in this room then it must have been reduced in size since then. This is not altogether impossible since the linear character of the mouldings easily allows for this.

Room G15, Darwin's Old Study, retains its contemporary marble fireplace so it cannot have been installed there.

The staircase hall, Room G11, must have had a fireplace surround before Darwin installed his stove, in 1845⁵. It is possible that he moved the surround to his bedroom at the same time, but paint analysis suggests that the arched recess was not created until about 1876. It seems unlikely that Darwin would have moved a relatively old fireplace to his room when it would have been outmoded.

The most plausible scenario is as follows. The F15 surround was probably installed in the Room G2 by Cresy as part of his overhaul of the house. The Dining Room still retains dado panelling *in-situ* which suggests that the room was lined out in a style similar to Room G14. We know Darwin extended this room by the addition of the bay in 1843 but, at that date, the fireplace would still have been quite fashionable and he probably would have been content to leave as it was. However, after 1858, it seems Darwin reworked the interior to bring it in line with Drawing Room addition of that year. It is at this point that it seems most likely that the surround now in room F15 was moved up into his bedroom. The westward shift of the chimney breast in the Dining Room was accompanied by a similar but lesser shift in the room above F2, **Figure 6**.

6 The marble fireplace in the Drawing Room, Room G5, from 1858

The Drawing Room was built in 1858. The white and grey marble surround appears to be original, with its heavy foliate brackets, **Figure 13**.

7 The marble fireplace in the Dining Room, Room G2, probably from 1858

³ See Thorp J R L, 1998, *The Final Report*

⁴ See Thorp J R L, 1998, *Historic Room Data Sheets*

⁵ See Thorp J R L, 1998, *Room Data Sheets*, Room G11

This fireplace is very similar in character to that in the Drawing Room. It has very similar proportions and brackets, although not as richly carved, **Figure 14**. The Dining Room appears to have been overhauled when the Drawing Room was built, the plaster cornices are very similar in character and the bay windows were enlarged and given 1/1 sashes to match those in the Drawing Room. It therefore seems likely that the present chimneypiece was installed at that date.

As in Room G14, the chimney breast has been moved westwards. This might have occurred either in 1843 when the bay was added or perhaps more likely after 1858 when the room was altered to match the new Drawing Room, Room G5, **Figure 6**.

8 The marble fireplace in Room F5, probably from 1858

The Room F5 was built as a bedroom above the Drawing Room addition in 1858. There is nothing to indicate that the marble fireplace is not that which was installed at this date, **Figure 15 - Figure 17**. It is the same width as the surround implied by the terminations in the dado panelling in Room G14 but, on stylistic grounds, it cannot be contemporary with the lining out of the room.

9 The 1930s fireplace in Room G14

In 1997 the existing fireplace surround, like the rest of the joinery in the room had been stripped of paint and varnished, **Figure 19**. It was relatively plain, incorporating a bolection moulding on blocks around the opening, a scroll-shaped board and a plain mantleshef. It was similar in character to the large bolection timber surround in the first floor room in the north-east corner of the building, Room F17, **Figure 20**. It was probably installed by Buckstone Brown as part of his museum creation. The original was probably removed when the house was used as a school 1907-27 and hot water filled radiators were installed.

10 Conclusion

The dado panelling and the use of reeded mouldings suggest that the house was thoroughly overhauled in the period around 1800-40. A date of c 1780 has been suggested for this block of work, identified by John Thorp as Phase 2 on the basis of architectural detail,⁶ but this may be too early. The pre-dominance of Greek Revival motifs, especially the reeded mouldings suggest that it occurred later. Either between 1800-1818, identified by Hedley Atkins as a period when 'Thomas Askew is thought to have laid out considerable sums of money on the house and estate...'⁷ (although his reasoning was perhaps flawed⁸) or c 1835 by the architect Cresy who, according to Darwin, spent £1500 on the house giving it a new roof⁹.

When Darwin arrived in 1842, Room G14, the largest in the house was used as a dining room. The Greek Revival dado panelling in Room G14 suggests that the room would then have had a marble fireplace similar to those in Rooms G15 and F2. The opening in the dado panelling suggests that it was larger than either of these two but, given the larger size of the room, this seems entirely reasonable. The reconstruction in this report, **Figure 21**, is based on the fireplace currently in Room F15. Its overall dimensions are based on the hearth opening and the terminations in the dado panelling. The mouldings are the same as those in the F15 surround except in length.

The marble fireplace in Room G14 probably survived until the house was taken over by Down House

⁶ Thorp J R L *The Final Report* 1998, p9

⁷ Atkins H, 1974, p17

⁸ Thorp J R L *Documentary History and Sources* 1998, p5

⁹ *Correspondence* Vol. 2, pp 323-325

School when, with the installation of water filled radiators, it became redundant. Buckstone Brown was probably responsible for the bolection moulded fireplace removed in 1998.

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Accompanied by *Documentary History and Sources* and *Historic Room Data Sheets*
under separate covers
Unpublished report produced for English Heritage

Figure 1 Reconstruction of the ground floor plan of Down House, Phase 1, c 1730-40 (Thorp J R L, *The Final Report*, 1998)

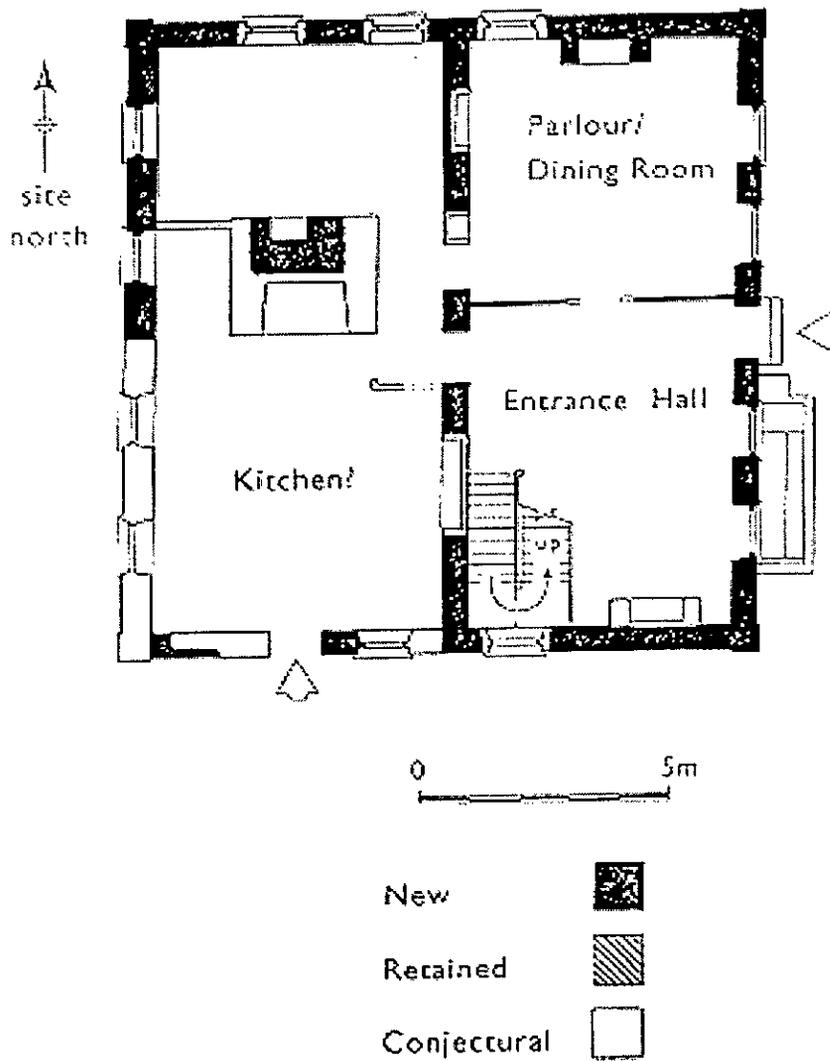


Figure 2 Reconstruction of the ground floor plan of Down House, Phase 2, c 1780 (Thorp J R L, *The Final Report*, 1998)

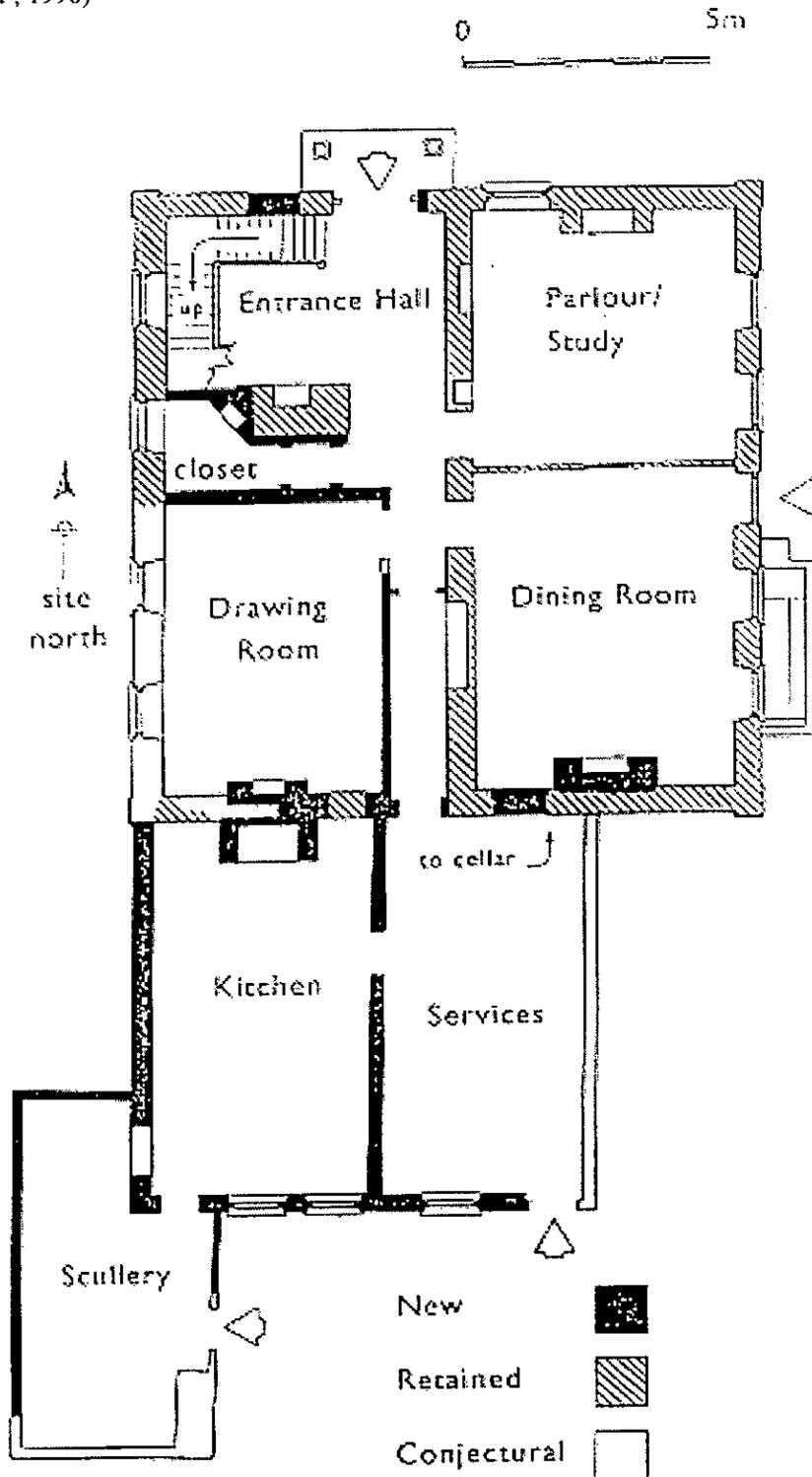


Figure 3 Plan and elevation of the fireplace in Room G14

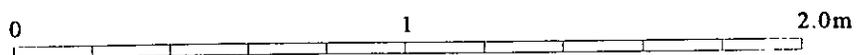
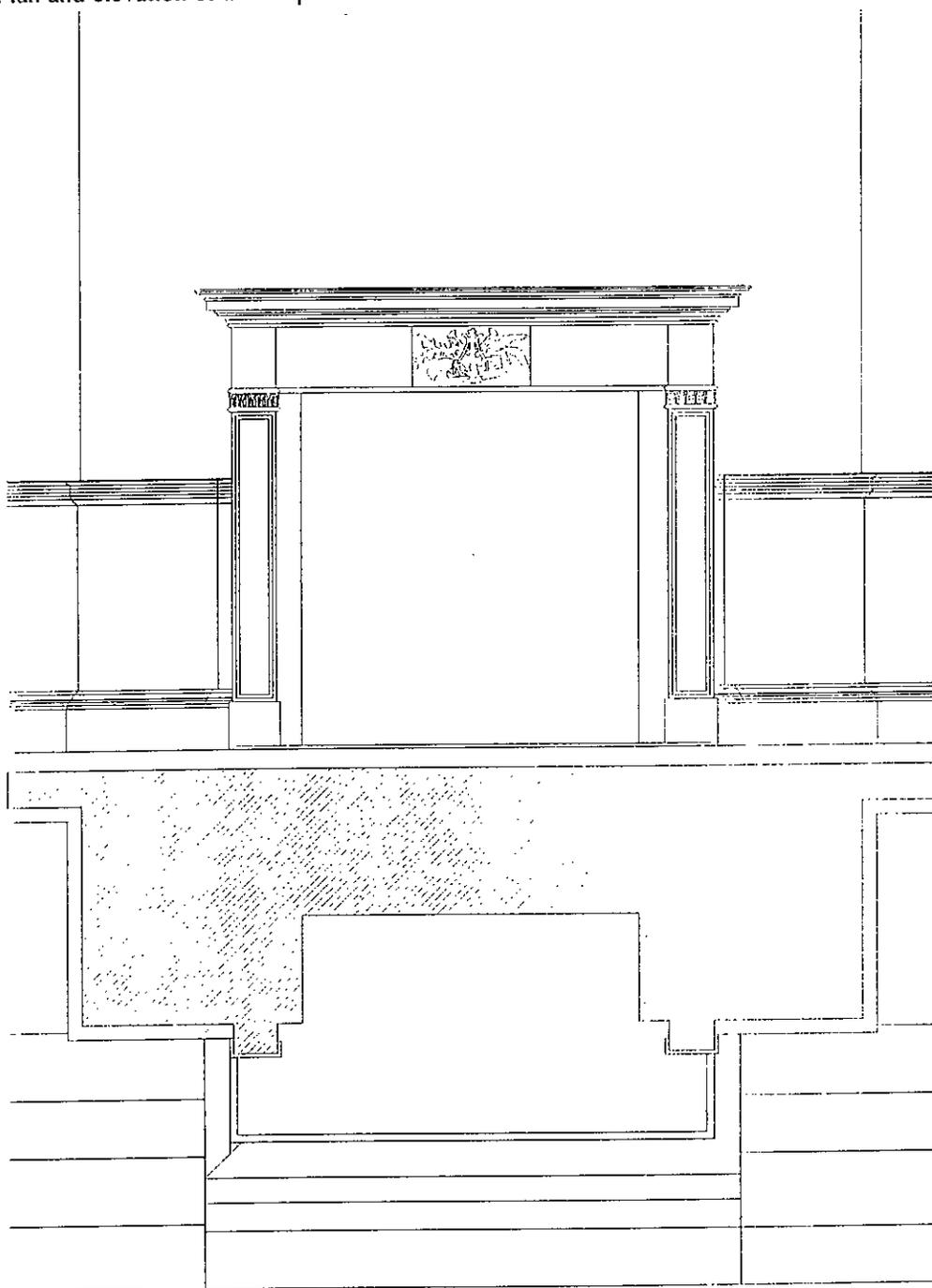


Figure 4 Photograph of the new fireplace in Room G14

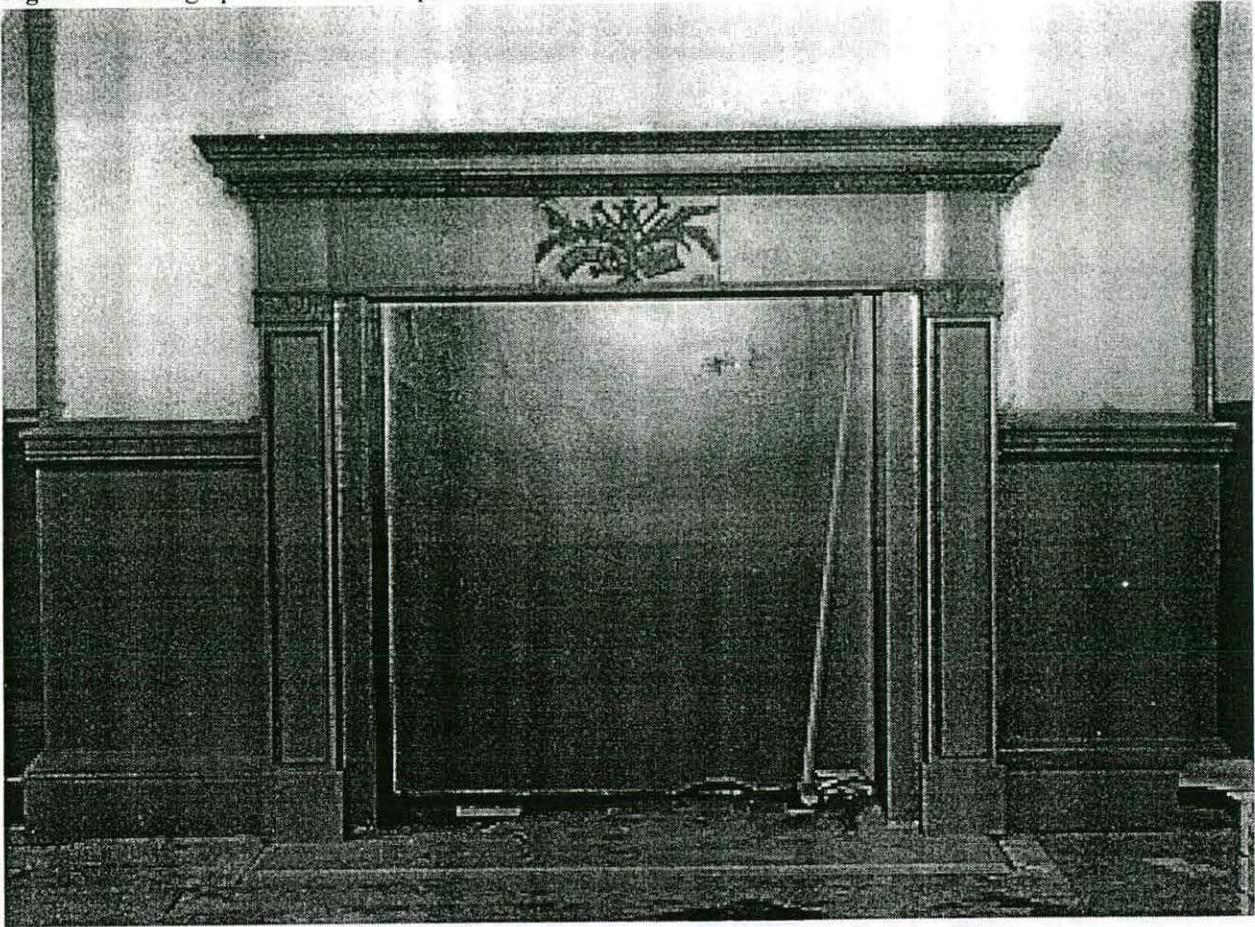


Figure 5 Detail of the new fireplace in Room G14

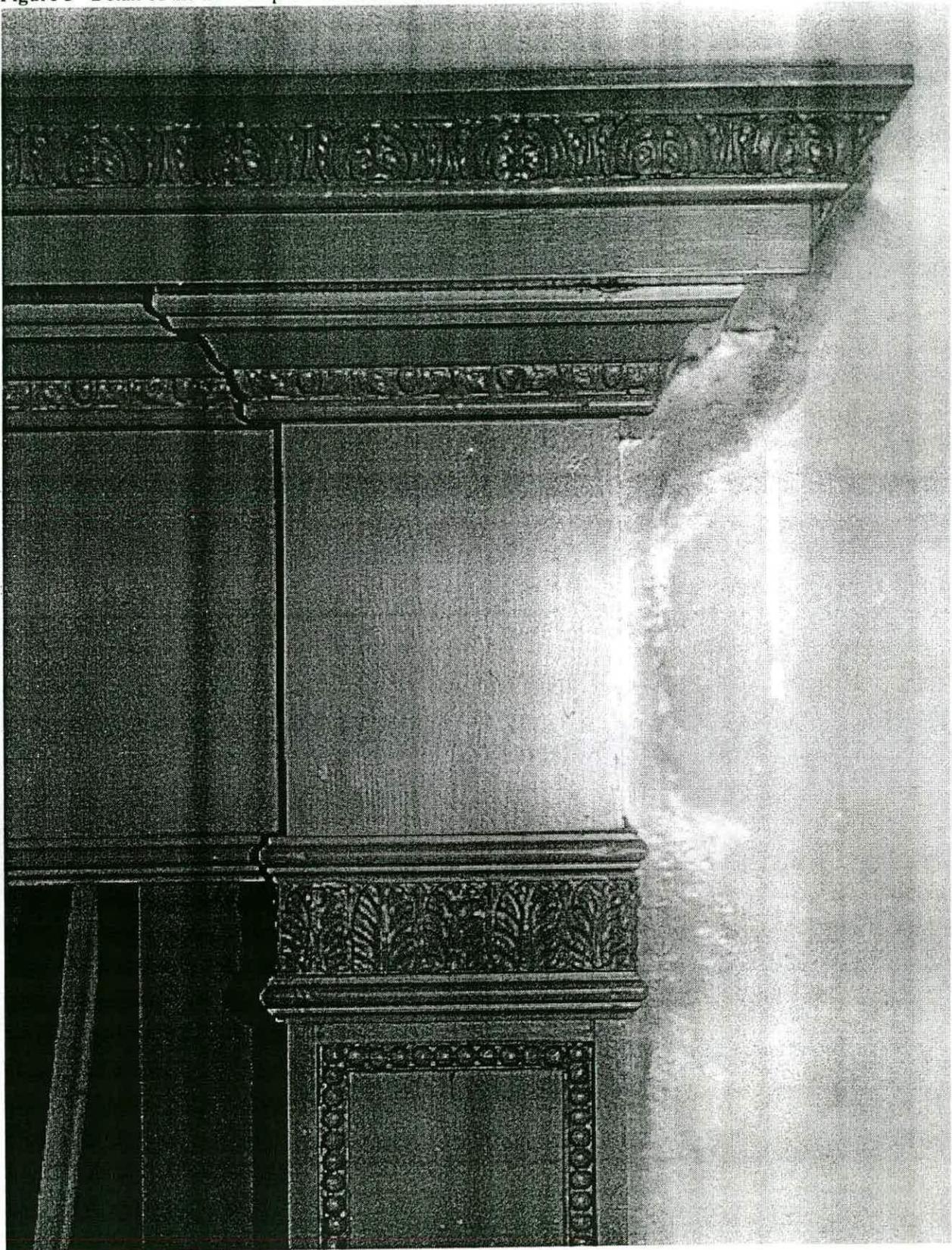


Figure 6 Cross section through Down House showing how the chimney breasts in Room G2 and 14 are offset from those above. The drawing shows the fireplace currently in Room F15 restored to its pre-1962 location in Room F2.

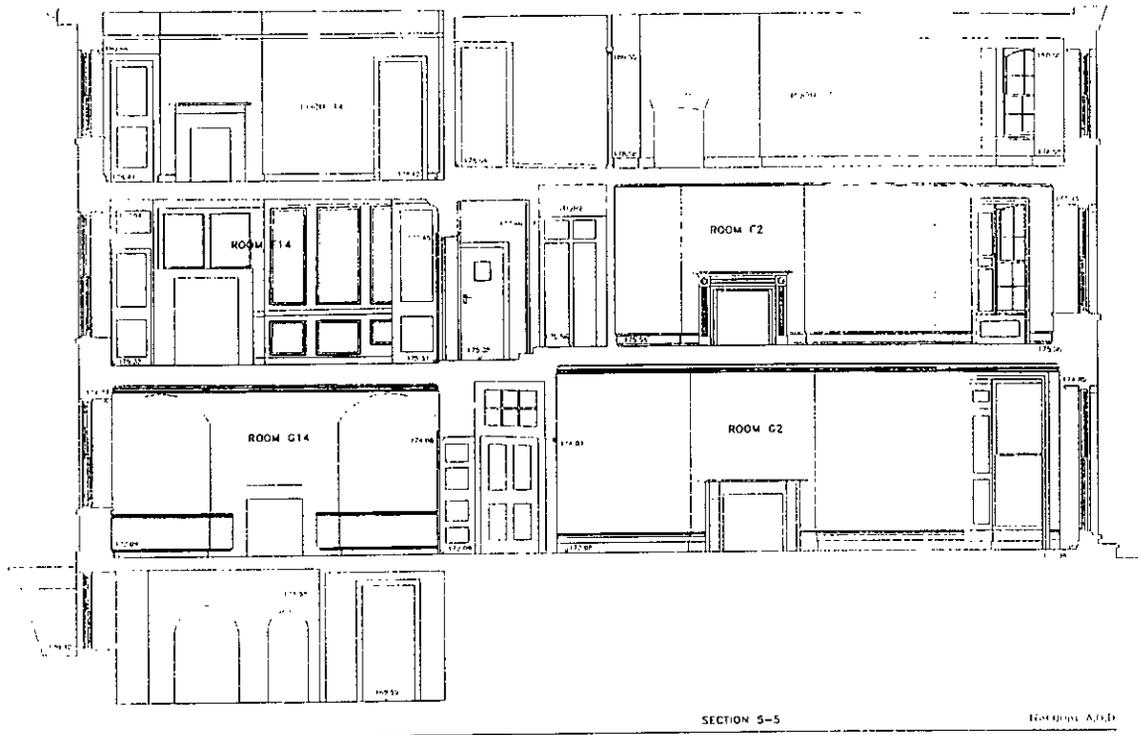


Figure 7 Plan and elevation of the fireplace in Darwin's Old Study, Room G15

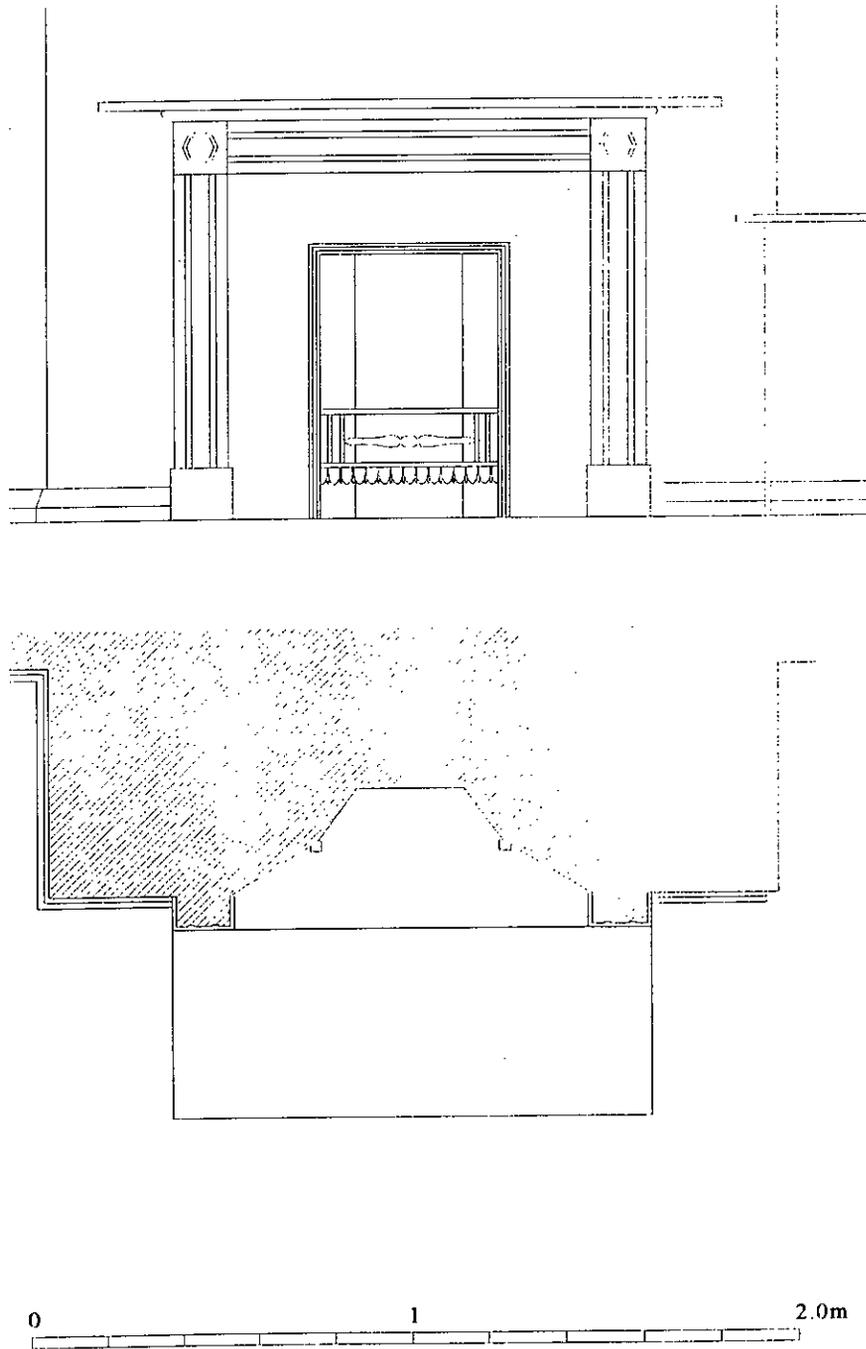


Figure 8 Photograph of the marble fireplace in Darwin's Old Study, Room G15

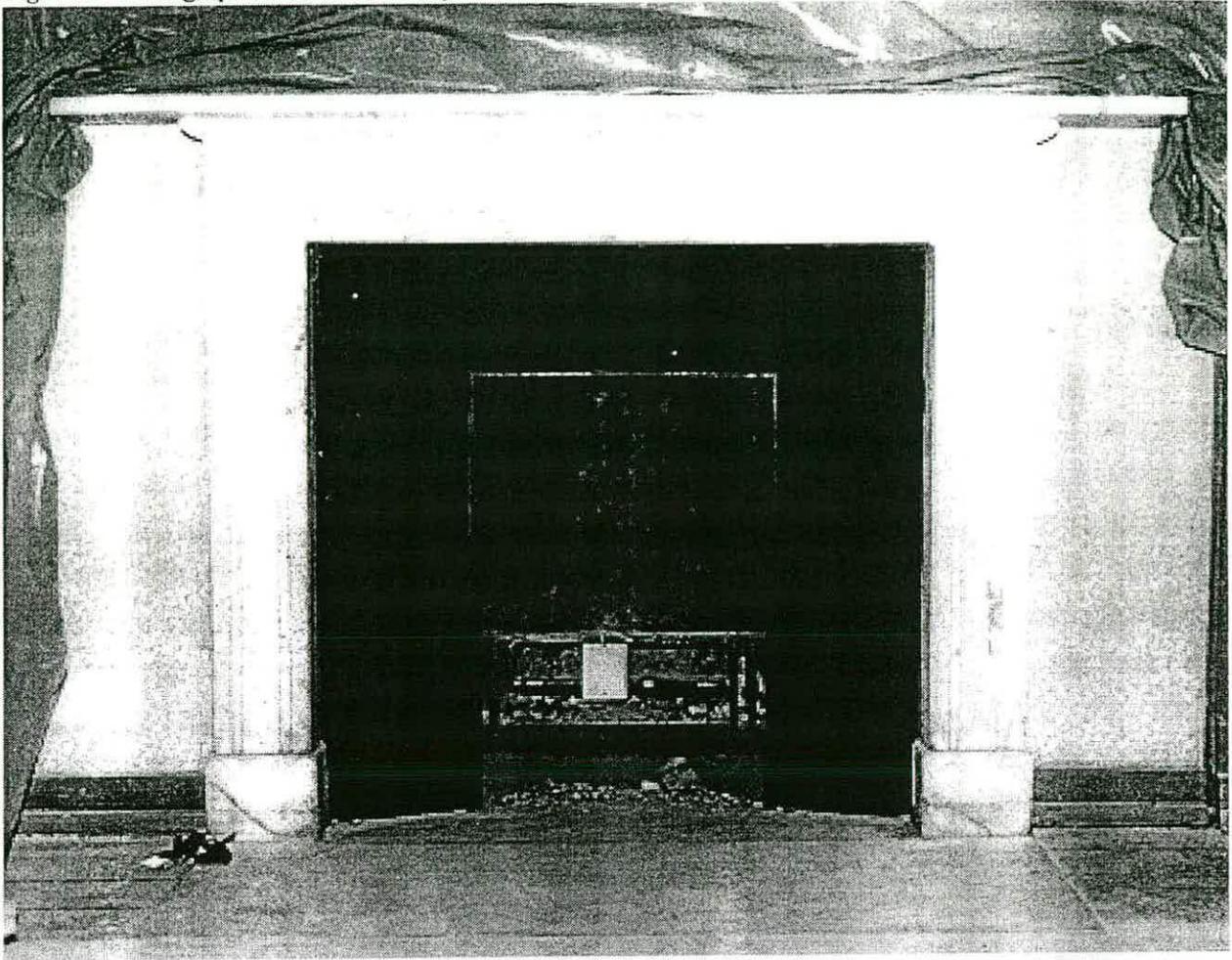


Figure 9 Detail of the marble fireplace in Darwin's Old Study, Room G15

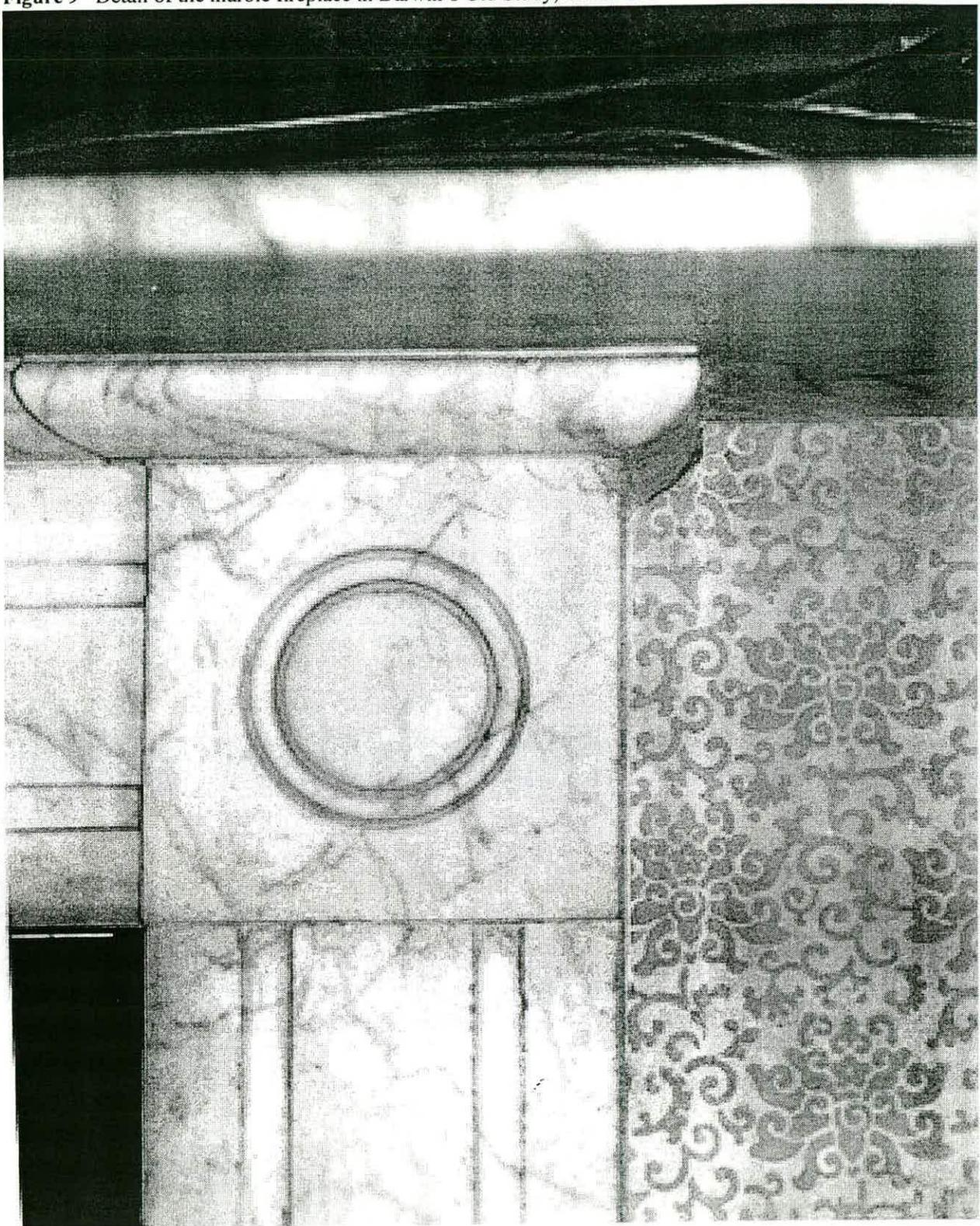


Figure 10 Plan and elevation of the purple and white marble fireplace in Room F15

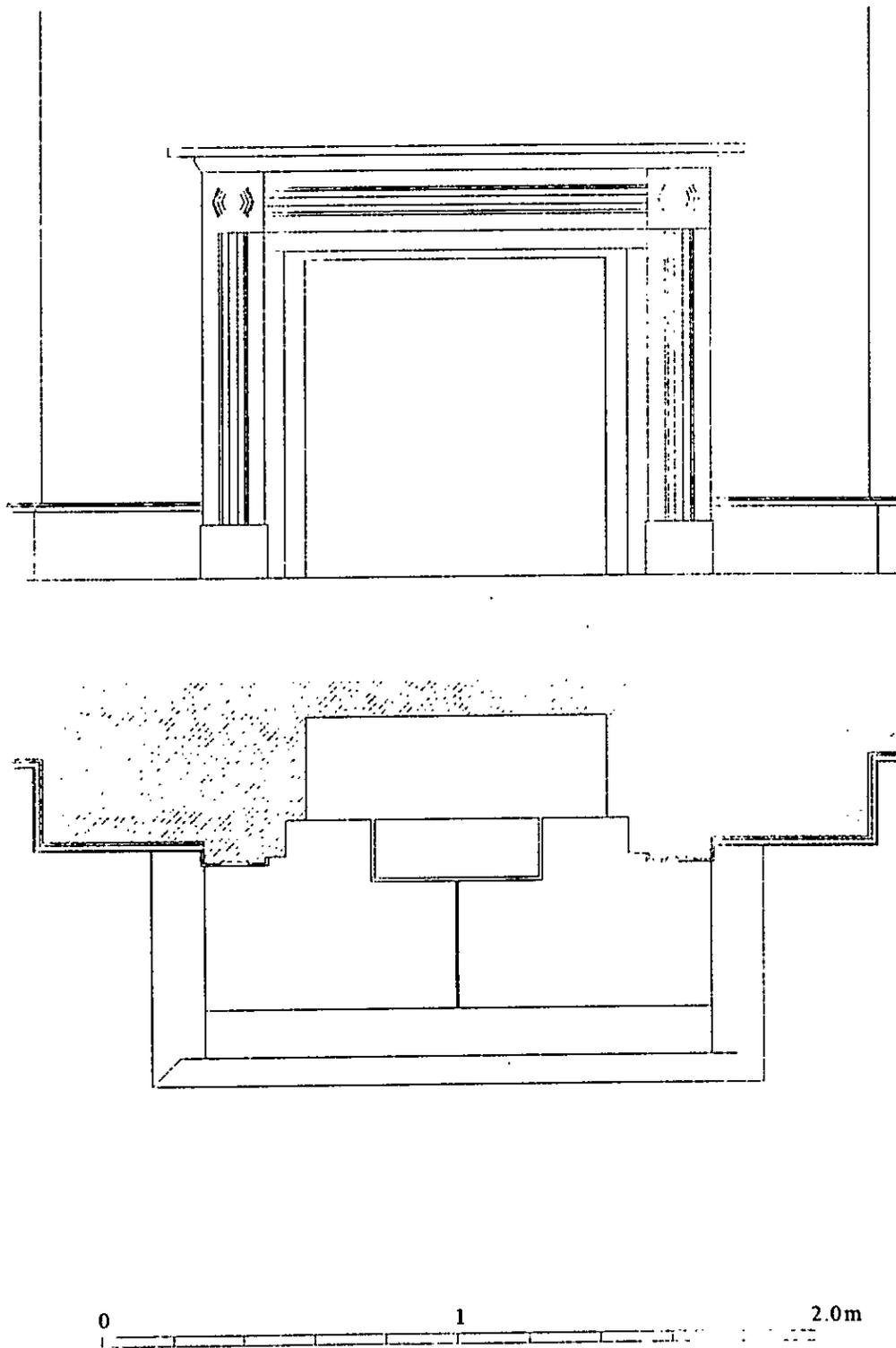


Figure 11 Photograph of the marble fireplace in Room F15, which until about 1962, was located in Darwin's bedroom, Room F2

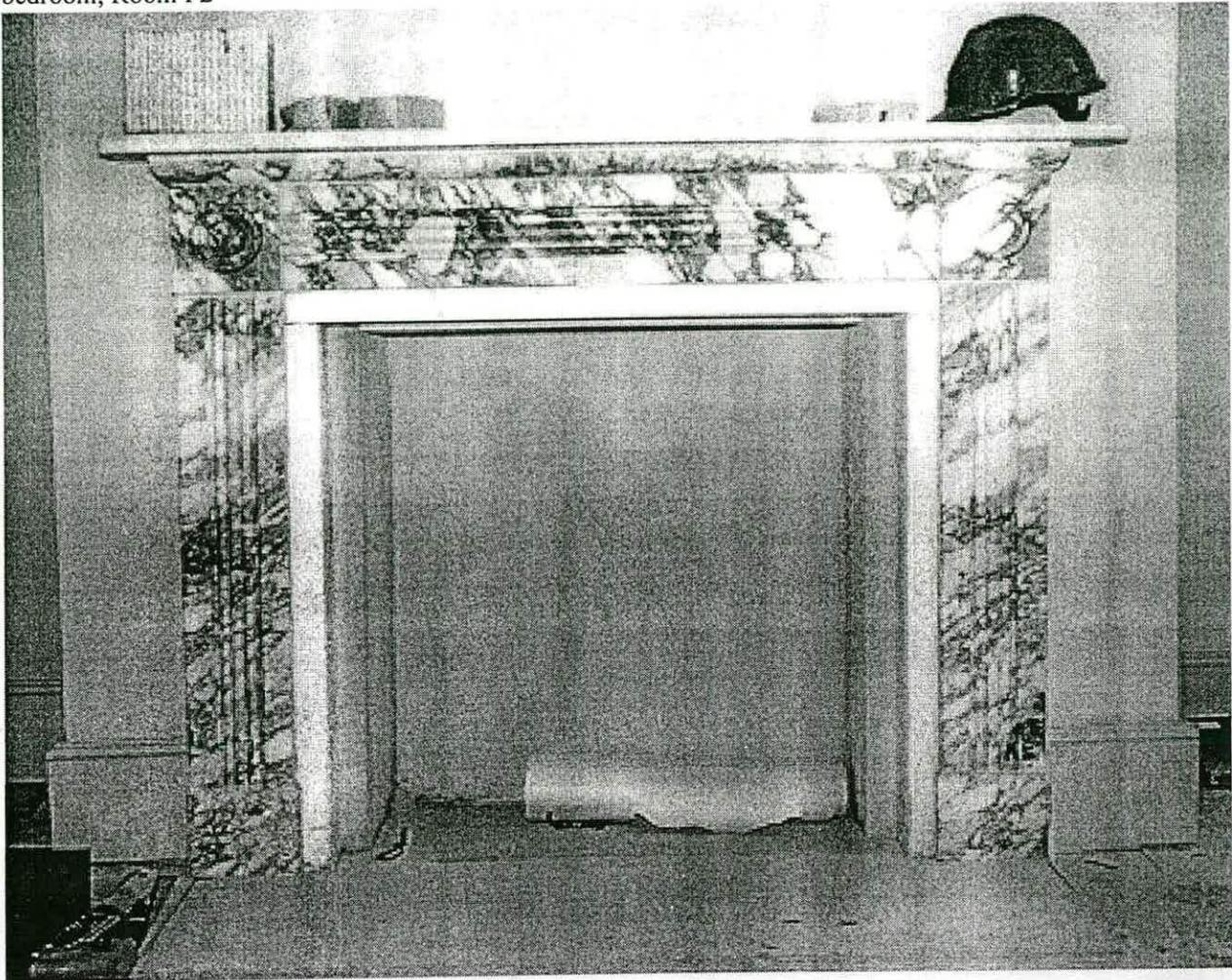


Figure 12 Detail of the marble fireplace in Room F15

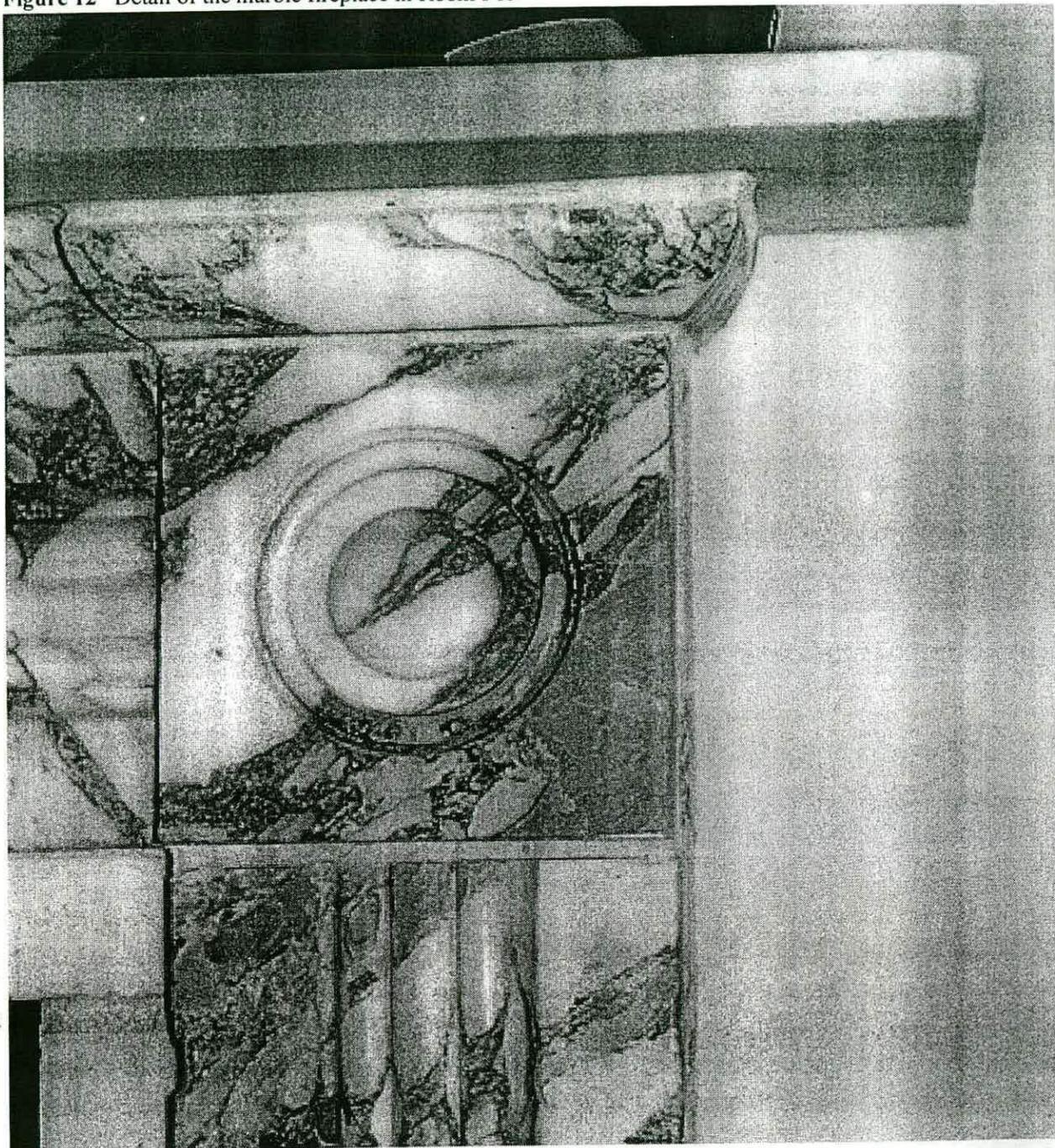


Figure 13 Photograph of the fireplace in the Drawing Room, Room G5, probably original and therefore installed in 1858



Figure 14 Photograph of the fireplace in the Dining Room, Room G2, probably contemporary with the construction of the Drawing Room in 1858 or following soon after



Figure 15 Plan and elevation of the fireplace in Room F5, probably from 1858

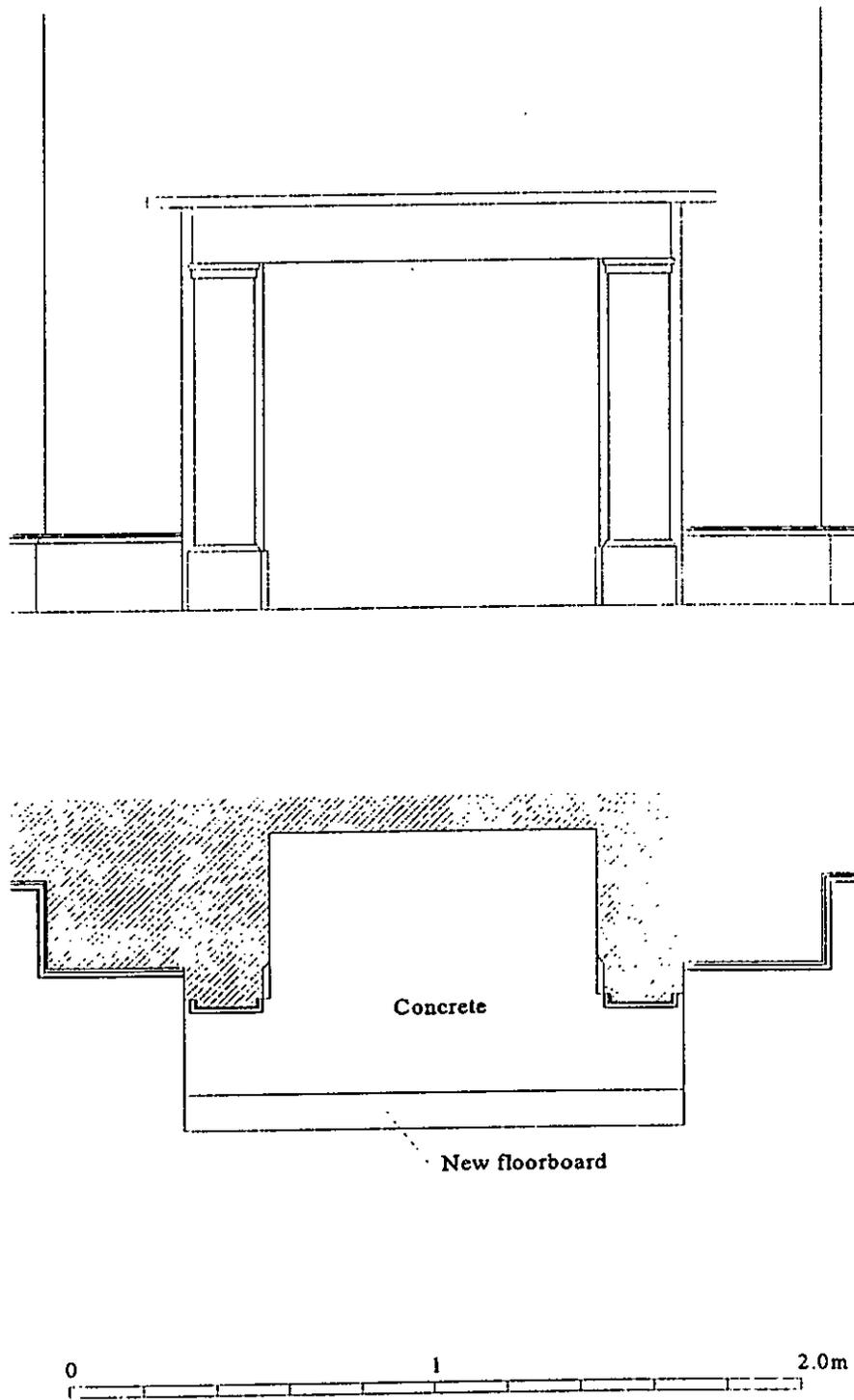


Figure 16 Photograph of the fireplace in Room F5, probably from 1858, the construction of the Drawing Room immediately below.

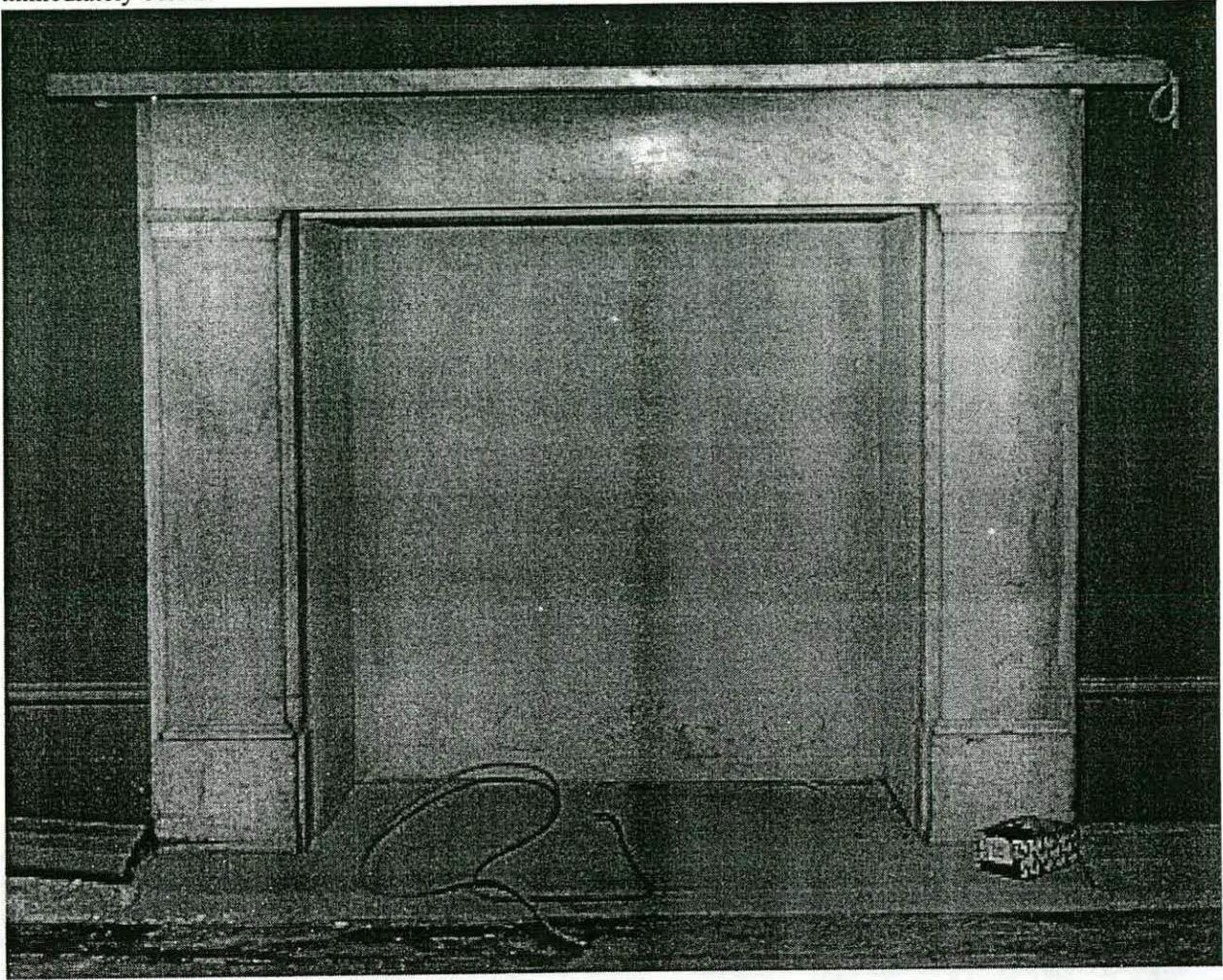


Figure 17 Detail of the fireplace in Room F5

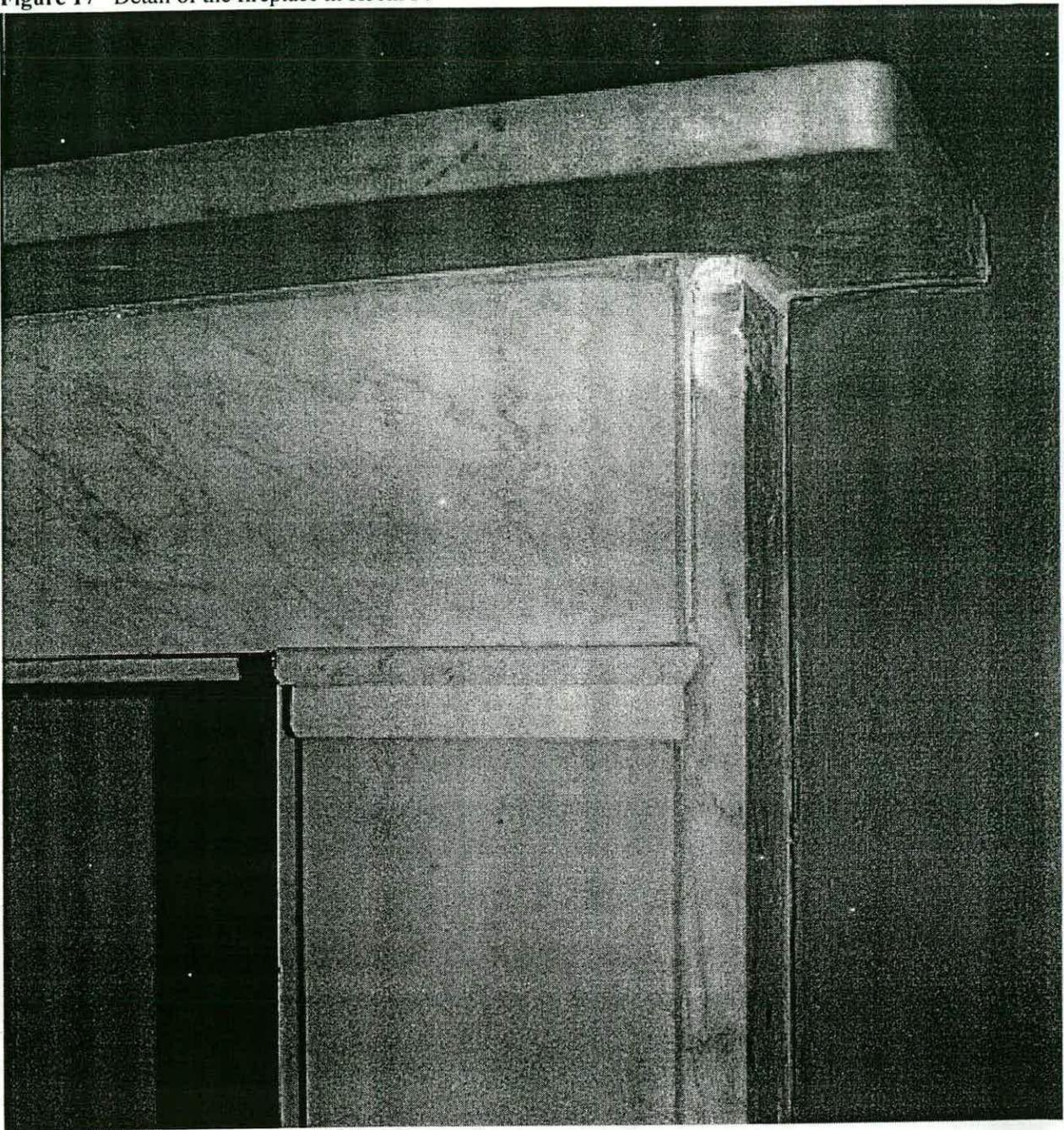
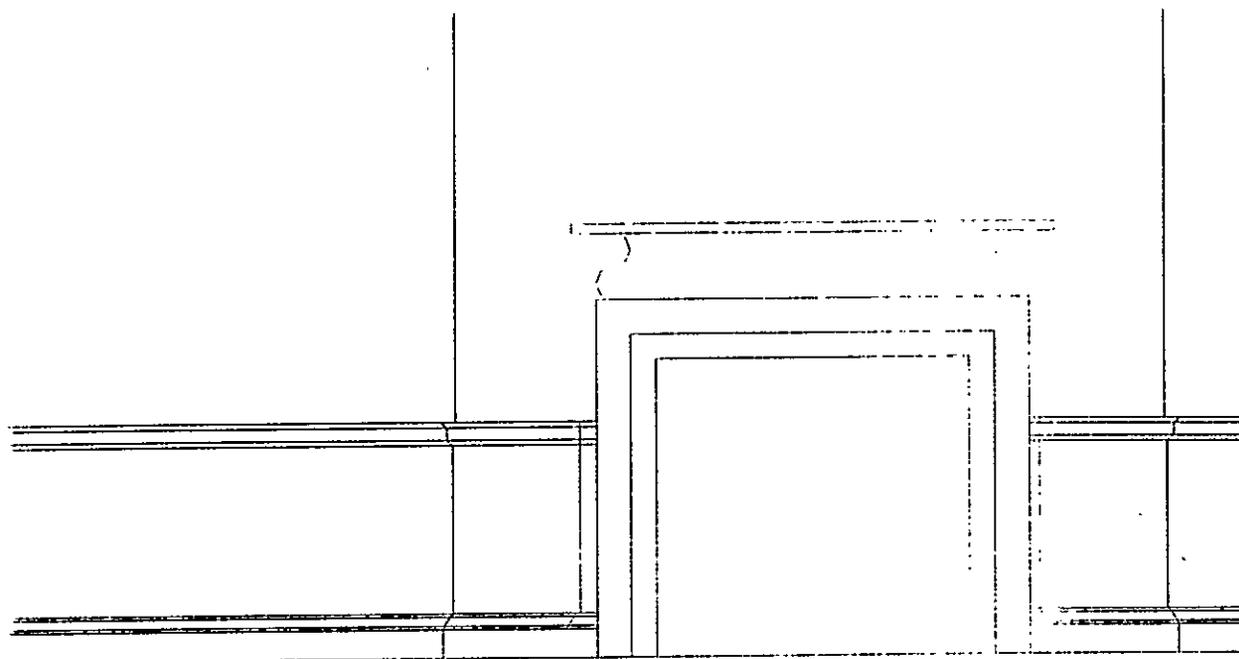


Figure 18 Plan and elevation of the 1930s fireplace in Room G14, removed in 1998. The plan of the floorframe shows the trimmers for the fireplaces before and after the chimney breast was moved.



Plan

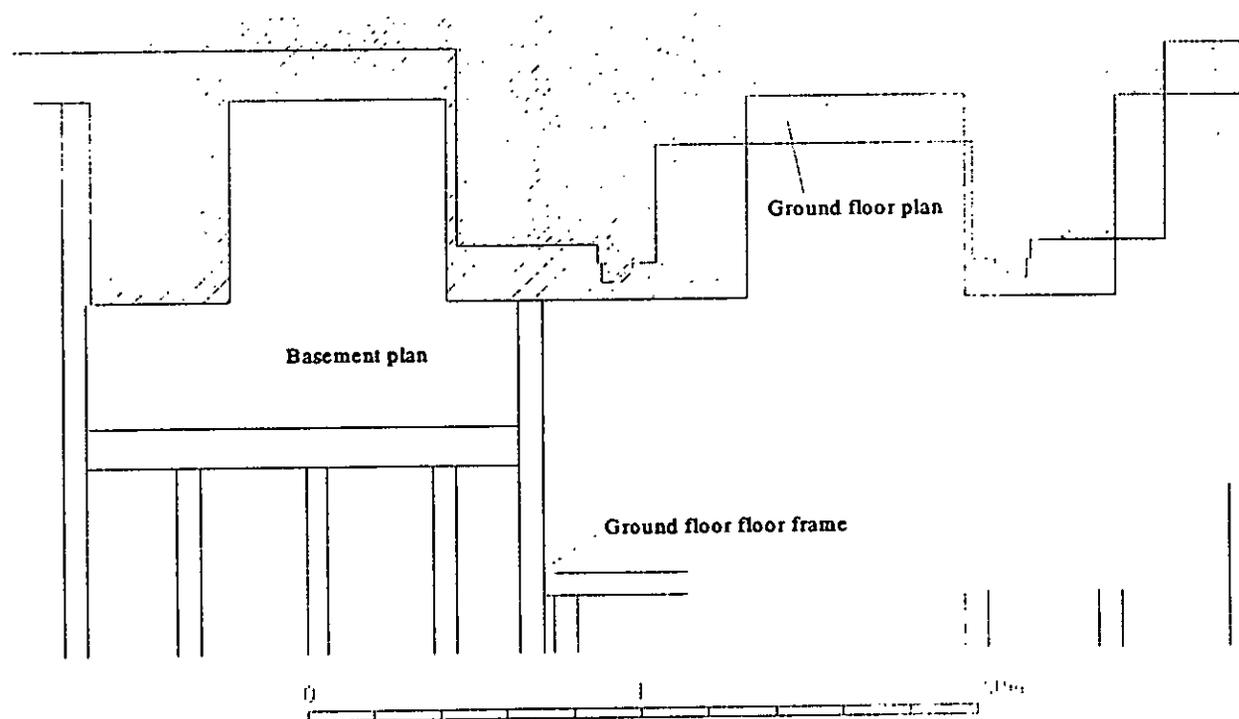


Figure 19 Photograph of the 1930s fireplace in Room G14

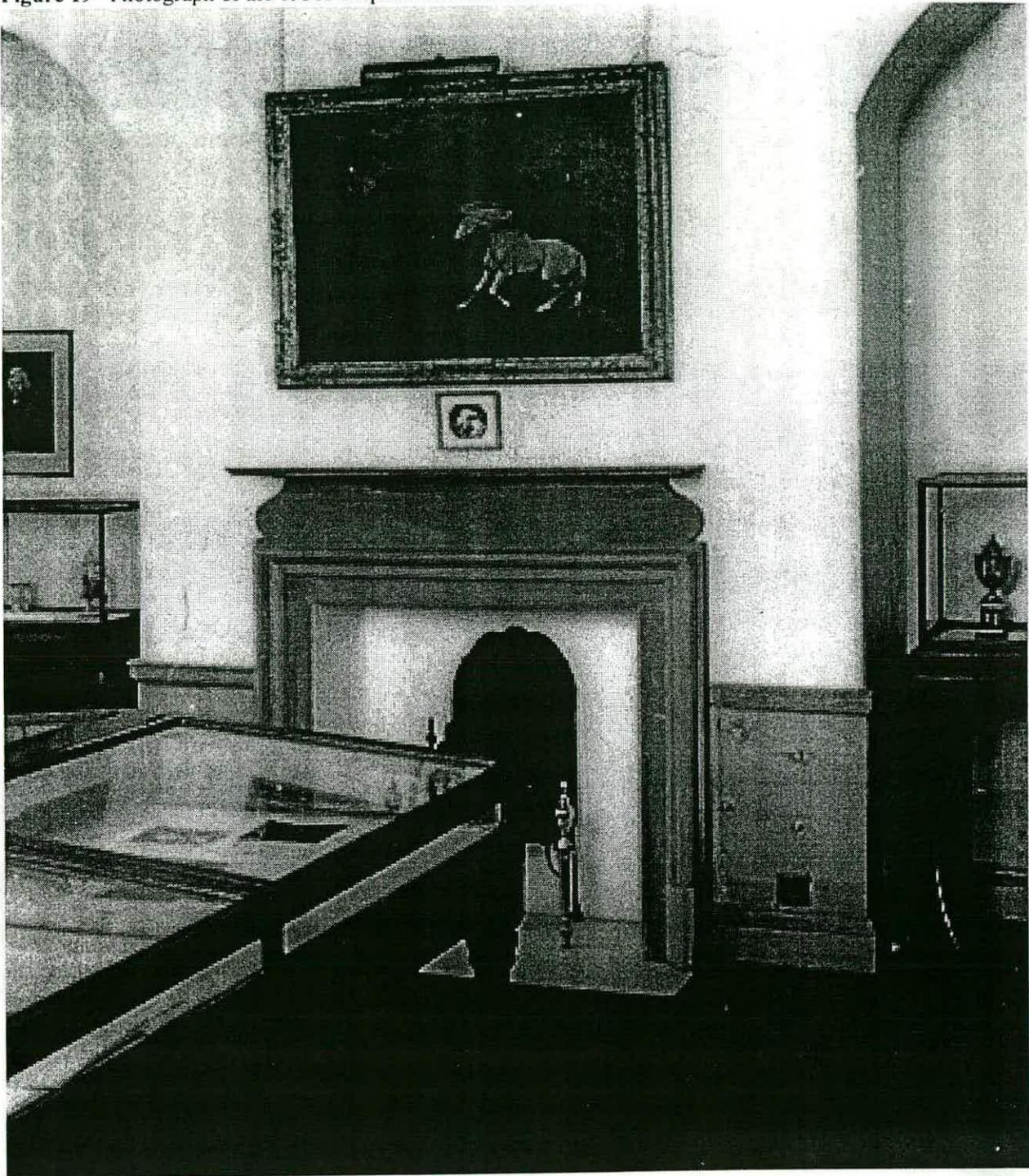


Figure 20 Photograph of the fireplace surround in Room F17, the first floor room in the north-east corner of the house and similar in character to the surround in Room G14.

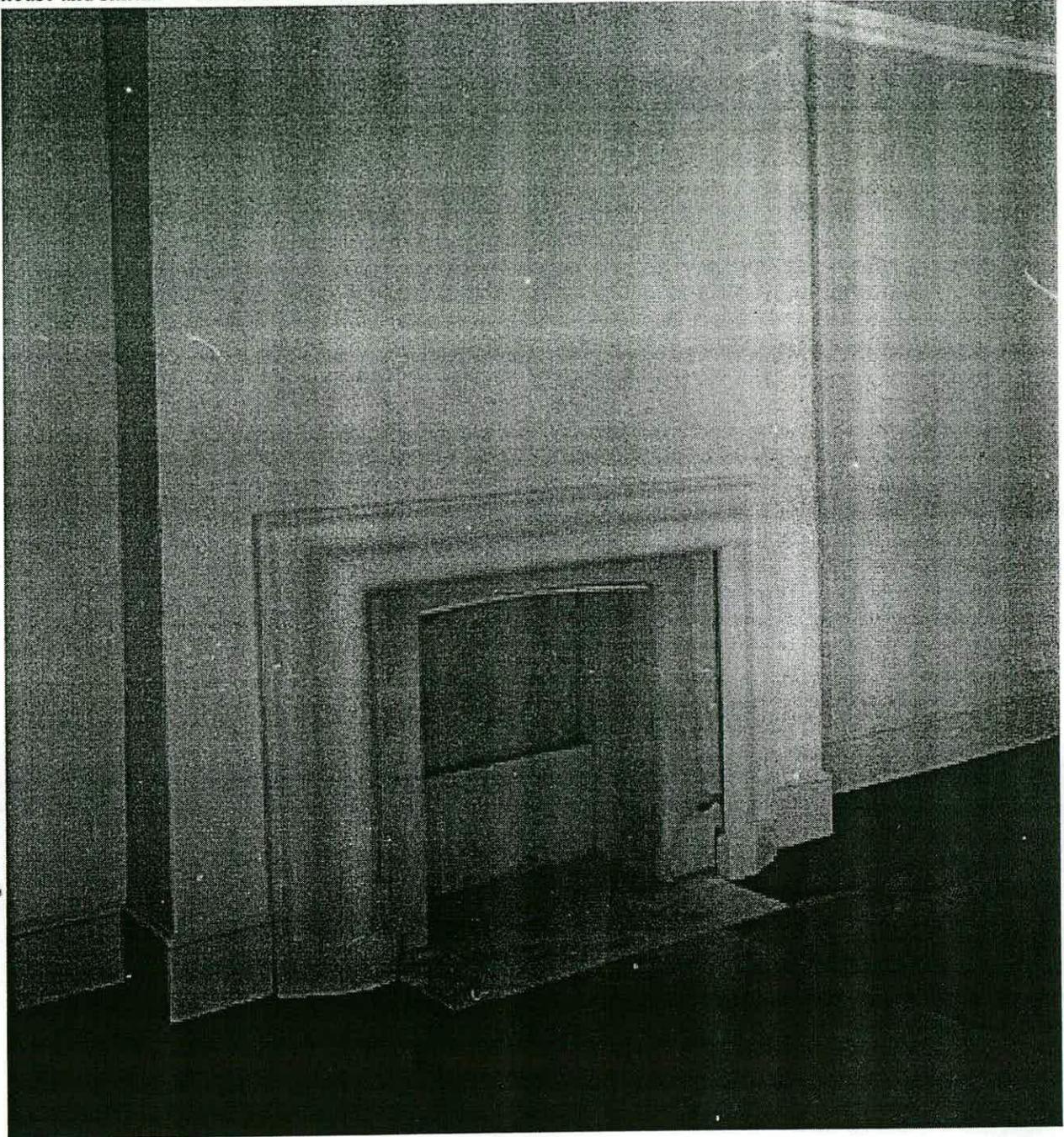


Figure 21 Reconstruction of the fireplace which stood in Room G14 during Darwin's occupation of the house

